

THE RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE  
OF THE  
CHINESE MIND.

BY  
REV. WILLIAM A. P. MARTIN, D.D.,  
PRESIDENT OF THE IMPERIAL TUNGWEN COLLEGE,  
PEKING, CHINA.

AN ADDRESS  
DELIVERED BEFORE THE  
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION  
AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK,  
FEBRUARY 6TH, 1891.



## THE RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE OF THE CHINESE MIND.

BY REV. W. A. P. MARTIN, D.D., PRESIDENT OF THE IMPERIAL TUNGWEN  
COLLEGE, PEKING, CHINA.

Religion consists of two elements, thought and feeling. Its thought is directed toward the mysterious problems of existence. In this aspect every religion that emanates from human thought is, to a certain extent, to be regarded as a philosophy, hence worthy of careful study, not as throwing light, which to us would be valuable, on the question of human destiny, but as throwing light on human character, on national character, and the relations of nations to each other. The religious experience of the Chinese people, the elements forming their religious beliefs, constitute the subject which I have to discuss. No field could, perhaps, be of greater interest, partly on account of the multitude of people who are affected by these views, partly on account of the vast antiquity presenting records reaching back, without a break in the chain, for many thousands of years, and also because that great people have been segregated by mountain chains and ocean breadths, from intercourse with the rest of mankind, to a very large extent for the greater part of their national existence. In order that our lessons may be of value, it will be important that we should take them out of the stream, we may say, at a point prior to the influx of the living waters of Christianity; for Christianity has to some extent affected the modes of thought of that people beyond the pale of Christian communities which, for the last three hundred years, have been growing up in that land. But the systems of which I have to speak date back far beyond that time. The missionary, thoughtful, and accustomed to study the field upon which he is entering, is somewhat like a scientific farmer who studies and analyzes the soil into which he intends to cast the precious seed. He may find that that soil was produced by the disintegration of many kinds of rocks, some deposited from water, others thrown up by the action of internal fires, others yet affected by atmospheric influences. We find, in a similar manner, the mental soil of China composed of three leading elements which have been commingled and brought into interaction in such a way as to present to the superficial observer a homogeneous aspect. These are known as the three religions—Confucian, Tauist and Buddhist.

Before attempting to point out their interaction, which, after all, is the objective point, allow me briefly to sketch the leading characteristics of each, as they rise successively before our eyes. I shall not be able to go into detail in our allotted time, nor would it be desirable, in-

asmuch as I have in mind the distinct object of pointing out only a few salient features by which these religions have acted upon each other.

The Confucian system did not originate with Confucius. He said : " I am an editor, not an author " He took the records of remote antiquity and sifted them, in such wise, however, as to exert in a most effective manner the influence of an editor, giving to the readers of all succeeding ages only that which he wished to have produce its effect on the national mind. We consequently date Confucianism from the beginning of his records, from the time of Yao and Shun, his favorite models of virtue, twenty-two centuries before the Christian era. Viewed as a religion, it presents two leading features : The first is the worship of Shang-ti ; the second is the worship of the spirits of men under the title of ancestors. Shang-ti signifies the Supreme Ruler. Coming before us in some of the most ancient books extant in any language, that august being suggests at once the Jehovah of the Christian Scriptures—the Lord, the Most High, who was worshipped not only by those who are recognized in the canon of Scripture as possessing the guidance of inspiration, but by such men as Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who was both king and priest. We find the earliest sovereigns of China combining this double function of king and priest, signalizing their accession, especially in the case of founders of dynasties, by going to mountain tops, the highest points approaching to heaven, and there offering up burnt sacrifices to the king of heaven, by whom kings reign and princes decree justice. If there were any doubt as to the lofty spiritual conception connected with this grand object of worship of the one alone to whom all kings and princes were recognized as accountable, we may find it in a single passage among many scores that I might cite to you if I only had time. The founder of the dynasty of Chow, eleven hundred years before the Christian era, is leading a small army to attack the powerful host which upheld the throne of a tyrant. On the battle-field, before the critical engagement, he addresses an eloquent harangue to his soldiers, and the most eloquent passage is that in which he points upward and says : " The Most High God, the Supreme Ruler, is looking down upon you. Let not your hearts waver." The worship of Shang-ti, the Most High (for that is almost a literal translation of the name) continues to the present day, the sovereign now on the throne acting, as did his predecessors of four thousand years ago, as high priest for the empire. On an altar within the walls of Peking he offers up burnt sacrifices to the Supreme Being. In the earliest days, however, this worship was impure. We find no point in Chinese history where it was not mingled with the worship of subordinate deities, nature-gods—gods of the hills and rivers—and that intermixture not only continues to the present day, but it has been largely increased, as I shall have occasion to show, by the influence of other religions, more or less corrupting even the comparative purity of the primitive ideas.

Confucius was himself strongly inclined to agnosticism. In his intimate conversations with his disciples he refuses to give them any positive statement in regard to the things beyond the reach of human sight. He said : " We know not life. How can we know death, or what lies beyond the grave ? We are unable properly to render service to our living parents ; how should we know how to render fitting

service to those who have passed into the other world?" Yet he enjoined service to those who have passed into the other world as the cardinal duty in his religious system, and it is that, more than anything else, which makes it a religion potent and living to this day. The worship of Shang-ti, the Supreme Ruler, grand as it is, is nevertheless, like a ray of the sun falling upon an iceberg, so far as its influence on the public mind is concerned. It is limited to the emperor and to a few remarkable and august manifestations of public ritual, but you do not find it in the household. You do not find it on the lips of the people. You do not find that God in that form has taken up his abode with men. He is still far remote, on the summit of an icy Olympus, as it were, although to a certain extent dimly perceived by the mind of the Chinese nation.

Tauism rose next. The founder of Tauism preceded Confucius, but by a kind of paradox his religion is of later date. The founder of Tauism goes by the name of Lautse, which signifies the "old philosopher," probably because he was old when Confucius was young. They were contemporaries. The Tauist system is not found clearly developed in the only book which has been transmitted to us from the hand of Lautse, and the authenticity of which has been to a large extent questioned. His followers, however, deduced from the obscure hints contained in that book two ideas, or rather, one idea, which afterward subdivided itself into two. The one idea was that by persistent effort we may acquire a mastery over matter in such a way as to command all its potencies, and employ them in accomplishing objects which would seem far beyond the reach of human power, unless it were elevated by this process of discipline. The matter thus spoken of is subjectively that of our own bodies, the discipline of which would result in a possible immortality, and objectively the material objects surrounding us, but chiefly the elemental forms, the careful study of which would enable man finally to transmute the baser metals into gold, and to accomplish many things which have the air of miracle. You perceive at once how naturally from this root conception springs the two fundamental ideas of alchemy—the transmutation of metals into gold and the attainment of immortality. These came forward under the influence of perhaps the two leading desires which characterize human existence—the first to be rich, the second to live long, or to live forever, in order to enjoy wealth. This system has, however, a close relation to what preceded it as a cause and explanation of the power with which it took hold of the human mind. I have just said that Confucius was something of an agnostic. He dealt largely in negations—refused to give any light beyond the grave, or to hold out any hope of immortality, although that is to some extent implied in the formal worship of ancestors. The longing of the human mind for a future life sought satisfaction in the Tauist conception of a possible immortality which was to be conquered by a long and laborious discipline, and which could not be the heritage of the many, but which might become the possession of a very few.

This system, at the same time, imparted a kind of life to all nature; every form of matter is instinct with an inextinguishable, divine essence, which is capable of assuming personality. In this

way it peopled the whole world with a new Pantheon of gods, fairies, and genii. The term *genii* we usually employ as a translation for *shensien* or *sienjin*, both forms being used, which is the word the Tauists apply to their adepts, those who obtain the precious gift, the elixir of immortality. This view may be illustrated by the following lines from a Chinese poem :

"A prince the draught immortal went to seek,  
And finding it he soared above the spheres ;  
In mountain caverns he had dwelt a week—  
Of human time it was a thousand years."

The Tauist system, deifying, as it were, matter, being essentially materialistic, laid hold upon that august and sublime conception of the ruler of the universe, and incorporated it into the material world. Not only so, having arrived at the idea of the five elements, it subdivided the idea of the supreme ruler, and made five gods, each a god of a special element. Thus it corrupted the idea of God, and it has been one of the most fruitful sources of corruption in the history of the Chinese mind, introducing a multitude of favorite idols, nature-gods of material origin, which continue to be worshipped to the present day.

The Buddhist system came in, as you are aware, early in the Christian era, the Emperor Ming Ti having sent a mission to India to bring Buddhist priests and books from that country in the year 66 of the Christian era. The occasion for the introduction of Buddhism was, on the one hand, the eclipse of Confucianism, and, on the other, the religious thought, or phases of thought, stimulated and introduced by Tauism. The defects of both were supposed to be supplied by the stronger, more intellectual, and more spiritual creed of India. The eclipse of Confucianism was not caused by the ascendancy of a rival creed. It was caused by a political revolution. The builder of the great wall rose up in his might and conquered the rival kings, and resolved that he would extirpate the feudal system. He was made to believe that without extirpating the books of Confucius he never could eradicate that system, and that though he might overthrow one king after another, yet after he should pass away the system would again spring from the pages of the Confucian books. He resolved to burn the books, and then, lest these books should be reproduced from the memory of able scholars, he put them to death, and thus flattered himself that he had swept away Confucianism from the face of the earth, and with it the whole of the feudal system. It was during this eclipse of Confucianism, which lasted for about two centuries, that the Emperor Ming Ti sent his embassy to India.

The Chinese people, having got the idea of immortality from Tauism, were at first fired with it, but disappointed that through that system there was no hope for any but a very few ; they were fascinated with a report they had heard of a blessed religion in India, which offered salvation to all. Hence the Emperor sent his embassy to India and introduced this new religion, which had, perhaps, to some extent, already found its way into China, and begun to exert some influence, but which from that day became a potent factor in the development of the Chinese mind, and continues to the present



day to be the leading *religious* influence in that country. I may say, as an illustration of the position which Buddhism acquired and holds in China, that I hold in my hand a document never given to the world in the English language, nor, perhaps, so far as I know, in any other Western language, showing that if in the year 66 an emperor was so impressed with Buddhism as to send an embassy to the West to introduce it into China, fourteen centuries later another emperor was so much influenced by it as to send an embassy to introduce the Buddhist classics from Thibet. (The paper, which was an edict of the Emperor Yungloh, 1413, was here read.) Various doctrines are alluded to in that paper, only one or two of which I will touch upon. I have already referred to the full and bounteous offer of salvation and immortality made by Buddhism as furnishing a very powerful attraction in contrast to the meagre promises of Tauism and the cold negations of Confucianism, which preceded. This was connected with the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, which was common to almost all Indian creeds. The Indian philosophy on that subject regarded transmigration as something amounting to a physical necessity, that it is absolutely impossible for a man to extinguish his being—that he has, as it has been expressed, come into this world without his own choice and will go into the next without his own choice, and thence go on in a succession of changes forever. This succession of changes is described under the figure of a wheel, the turn of destiny, or wheel of fate, which is represented as revolving rapidly and dropping out human souls to be born again in the form of man or of some higher or lower being, there being six categories in all, according to the Buddhist division. The religious view of the founder of the faith was pessimistic. To escape from this series of changes constitutes happiness, and he devised a method for that purpose. In the Northern School of Buddhism, especially in its popular phase, we seldom meet with this idea. We meet more frequently with the idea that to rise in the scale of being is happiness. Sak-yamuni had in his system no heaven. The Northern Buddhism, which has prevailed in China, has a heaven, borrowed, it may be, from the Christian's Paradise. It has, presiding over that heaven, a goddess of mercy, borrowed, perhaps, from the Catholic conception of the mother of Jesus Christ. Many other ideas present a transformation—I will not say a travesty—of Christianity.

We are asked particularly the relation and the interaction of these three systems which we have thus briefly sketched. You have noted that they rose one after the other, each of them introduced by a felt want, and that each was preceded by a yearning of the human soul for something better; consequently, in a religious point of view, each one may be considered as an advance upon that by which it was preceded. They were a long time antagonistic, sometimes even inciting bloody persecutions, but in this day they have become comparatively quiescent, like active chemicals, which, being brought into juxtaposition, exert for a time their various qualities, but which soon become quiescent and inert, until they are brought into contact with some more energetic agent. We shall find that in Christianity. A remarkable illustration of the quiescence of these long active and conflicting systems is found in the fact that there are in some parts of China

little shrines or temples where the three religions are seen represented by their founders—Confucius, Buddha, and Lautse—all sitting side by side and receiving at one and the same time the homage of worshippers who acknowledge all three. You might object that it would be a strange mind that would acknowledge and swallow all these creeds, yet there are many who assert that the three creeds are identical, if you could only get down to the bottom. In fact, nothing is more contradictory. The Confucian system is essentially ethical; the Buddhist system is pure idealism, as pure as that of Berkeley or Hegel; the Tauist system is materialistic, beginning with gross materialism. How is it possible that three systems so utterly divergent should ever be reconciled? The fact is, they are irreconcilable. Each one presents some one thing which meets a human want, but reconciliation there is none; peace, union, harmony, there cannot be, though a truce, a permanent truce, seems at present to exist between them. They are no longer belligerent. The question may be raised: What benefit has each one of these conferred upon the Chinese people? Each one has enlarged and widened the speculative thought and religious conceptions of the people. Confucianism gave them, or, at least, preserved for them, and preserves to the present day, the grand idea of the Supreme Ruler, and it bears witness, too, to the doctrine of immortality, in the duty of worshipping departed spirits. But this is faint, very faint, in comparison with the religious teaching of the other two sects. Buddhism has been especially potent in instilling ideas which are so nearly akin to those propagated by Christianity as again to prepare the way for the introduction of another system. Buddhism, no doubt, vastly enlarged the area of Chinese conceptions. To borrow a mathematical illustration, the religious ideas of the Chinese were limited, before the introduction of Buddhism, to two dimensions, something that may be described as a "flat-land," with length and breadth, but no height. Buddhism gives it height, soaring up to the heavens and developing the conception of the universe, the grandeur of which, perhaps, nothing can exceed. Is it possible that after this universe of three dimensions we shall have one of four dimensions? Mathematicians tell us that with space of four dimensions it is possible to do many things which cannot be done without it. There is, in my view, room for the fourth dimension, or, to drop the figure, there is room for a fourth stage in the progression, one which China is waiting for—that is, the introduction of Christianity. Each of the previous religions was ushered in by a felt want. Christianity alone can supply the defects of all the systems and present one harmonious unity. If I were to express in one word what Christianity is to confer upon China, it would be this: Not a God seated far away, upon some remote Olympus, as in the Confucian system; not a God inherent in matter, as in the Tauist system; not a God, as in the Buddhist system, who has risen from the ranks of the disciples of virtue, a mere deified man, but God, the Spirit of the universe, in Christ Jesus, coming into the human soul, taking up his abode there and working by his Holy Spirit a regenerating influence such as none of these creeds has ever possessed, and of which they have presented only a faint and dim prophecy. This I believe to be the mission of Christianity, and I believe the Chinese, though it may be unconsciously, are waiting for it and reaching out after it.



In reply to a question as to what religion preceded Confucianism, Dr. Martin said :

“Confucius edited the canonical books of China, the earliest of which, or rather the records contained in it, go back twenty-two hundred years before Christ. These two religious elements of the Confucian system, worship of Shang-ti (conjoined with that of the hills and rivers) and that of the deceased ancestors, were in full flower at that time. These must have taken some time to attain the form in which they appeared. As to the idea of the Supreme Ruler, which so far as it goes, is very analogous to the Christian's idea of God, whether that is from a patriarchal tradition, as I am inclined to think, I will not affirm.”





